



Overcoming special measures through curriculum, quality of teaching and culture

*Simon Wade,
Beckfoot Upper Heaton*

‘No badge yet’, but Simon Wade, principal, Beckfoot Upper Heaton School, delves into the staff and student contributions that give great cause for confidence in the school’s future

As I sat in the Alhambra Theatre, Bradford, just before Christmas watching a group of our students from years 7, 8 and 9 performing Macbeth to a live audience, I was mesmerised and incredibly proud. I couldn’t help but think that our belief that anything is possible was being demonstrated to me by those children. Our school values of enjoy, learn,

succeed shone from every one of them on the stage that night. It felt good to know that we were making a difference.

Our journey (we like to call it that) began officially in September 2015 when we opened as a converter academy as part of the Beckfoot Trust, a cluster of nine cross phase Bradford schools. All of them are within a 20-minute drive of Beckfoot School, all genuinely comprehensive in character and keen to demonstrate that school collaborative practice can create exceptionally successful learning communities.

Beckfoot Upper Heaton, previously known as Belle Vue Boys School, had been in the depths of special measures when I arrived as principal, having been deputy head at Beckfoot School. It was awash with supply teachers and there was a distinct lack of trust across the staff given what they had been through in the preceding years. The school roll was falling dramatically and finances were a major concern. Other factors to note included students’ extremely low starting points, the absence of a SENCO or bespoke SEND provision, high levels of deprivation, low self-esteem (staff and students), English as a second language for the majority and a crumbling site that was leaking in most areas every time it rained. Where to start?

As a trust we believe passionately in the power of leadership at all levels. So, the first and most obvious task was to restructure the leadership team. I worried about how the team I was inheriting would view me and adapt to the change. I look back now and will never forget how fortunate





I was to begin work with a team that were so supportive and who all had a strong desire to be liberated to make a difference. We discussed what was expected of each of them, how they would be held to account and the importance of emotional intelligence. I wanted a group that understood their own roles and those of others in the team; no silos. I really wanted them to be more strategic in their work and for us to forge a unit that was impenetrable. As long as we were honest we would mature and grow in confidence.

The message that anything is possible was given a major boost when one of our year 11 students secured an apprenticeship with Aston Martin, beating thousands of other applicants

Just over two years in and we all really get on, don't take ourselves too seriously and remain

resolute in our determination to make this a great school in this part of Bradford.

Once that was done and, given the enormity of the task ahead of us, we prioritised three main areas:

- 1. Behaviour, attendance and punctuality**
- 2. Teaching and learning**
- 3. Culture.**

To begin, I was adamant that, to work here, staff really need to believe that all young people have talent and can achieve great things. It is our collective job to prepare them, by the time they leave us, to be able to stand tall beside any other young person, anywhere in the world, regardless of background, race, religion or gender. Of course there is much more, but that was the starting point.

Placing the responsibility on students

Behaviour needed sorting and we began with the introduction of basic expectations that were clear, easy to follow and placed

much of the responsibility for learning, progress and attitude on students. We facilitated a group of young people to write a strategy and spent a little money making their work come to life around the school. Within the first term, staff and students were telling us that things were different; staff could teach and students could learn.

What I had missed, though, is that this work really needed more of our own school's stamp. So by the end of year one, the students rewrote the strategy to better suit our school. We introduced tutoring and an assembly programme (I know!) and made a big issue of communicating with students, challenging them and instilling in them the importance to aim high and believe that anything is possible. This was given a major boost when one of our year 11 students secured an apprenticeship with Aston Martin, beating thousands of other applicants most of whom were graduates. One of our own doing something so amazing made a huge difference.

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At the same time, we created what we thought at the time was an absurdly aspirational school learning journey, based on at least 5+ levels of progress (in old money) for all. Our students quickly embraced the challenge, knew and understood their targets and the importance of being supported via intervention when they were struggling. We are getting stronger all the time and our work on curriculum, quality of teaching and culture will help improve our attainment, I'm sure.

Our recent IDSR shows a school that is improving, and in the context of similar schools our vision and hard work is beginning to have impact. FFT Aspire is more positive still and, this year,

our basics English and maths (4+) ranks us 11 in comparison to similar schools. Contextually it's even better at 8, which is a positive I'm delighted to take given where we have come from.

Reviving neglected subjects

Of course teaching and learning was the number one priority but the school was littered with supply staff and there was little or no geography, MfL, music or PE happening. In science, three of the five staff were supply, and it was all a bit of a mess at the start. Again, we set out our expectations for staff, had a major recruitment drive, with the support of the trust, and by the end of year one we were fully staffed and the quality of teaching was getting stronger.

We worked tirelessly on the little things, like meeting and greeting students at the door, seating plans, using the registers to assess students' attitude to learning. We also introduced a prescriptive lesson structure (we have moved away from that now, thankfully) all tied together with

a rigorous performance management programme. Staff understood their role in supporting students, supporting our ambition and making a difference to the lives of young people. We have such a long way to go but our bespoke programmes such as Progress 9 and Take 10 are having a significant impact. We will never shift our drive to secure 100% high quality teaching and learning across school; we are not there yet.

Culture is that thing that is often hard to measure. It's the buzz, the feel, you sense around the building. It's growing here and is being hugely supported by a few things. Firstly, the manner in which we try to communicate with students and especially how we talk to them; respect is critical. It's about believing in them and allowing them as many opportunities as possible to experience new things and broaden their horizons. Our new building, which we have recently moved into, has also made a huge difference.



A culture of genuine student leadership

But culture also involves empowering students, in my view. We are big fans of genuine, not tokenistic, student leadership. We have a Beckfoot Upper Heaton Student Leadership (BUHSL) group, which is just entering its second year, and we take the election process very seriously. They are a very special group who have totally revamped our rewards strategy and who are working on impact initiatives related to eco school status and healthy eating. They are incredibly insightful and honest and they are making a difference, in their own way, to helping us create the school we want.

We believe that we are doing special things here and the school bears little or no resemblance to the place I started at over two years ago. We continue to work tirelessly on our curriculum; on how we use data to support every aspect of our work. Our three-year strategic vision (involving the whole school community), our SEF and our school improvement plan (SIP) are very simple documents understood by all. Those staff that are here share our desire to make this school great and know the role they must play on our journey to outstanding. I keep saying that while we are making a difference, the reality is that we have no badge just yet. We'll get

there though, as long as we keep believing in our vision and our journey and we work hard!

The student leadership team are incredibly insightful and honest and they are making a difference, in their own way, to helping us create the school we want

